

Summary of TEN meeting in Wembley 7.2.05

Present:

Peter Bishop, Director of Environment LB Camden

Paul Clark, Chief Planning Officer, LB Redbridge

Marc Dorfman, Director of Regeneration, LB Ealing

Paul Evans, Strategic Director of Regeneration, LB Southwark

David Hennings, Director of Strategic Planning, LB Haringey

John Herman, Divisional Director, Regeneration and Development, LB Newham

Nicholas Falk, URBED

Esther Caplin, URBED

Hosted by LB Brent:

Richard Saunders, Director of Environment

Chris Walker, Director of Planning

Apologies

Chris Donovan, Assistant Director (Strategy, Planning and Regeneration) LB Bexley

Phillip Goodwin, Director of Planning and Development, LB Croydon

The third meeting in the second TEN series took place in Wembley and focused on the development around the new Stadium. Briefing was circulated in advance including papers on Gateshead (where sports were used as a focus for community development), Reading (where transport links between the city centre and the stadium were achieved), and extracts from a contemporary account of the development of Wembley and the Empire Exhibition of 1924, which showed how the area had first developed due to its proximity by the Metropolitan Railway to central London.

The meeting began with a tour of the redevelopment area, starting at Wembley Park Station and moving down Empire Way and around the Stadium site, and taking in the linkage between Wembley High Road and the Stadium via a pedestrian bridge through Wembley Central Station.

Richard Saunders gave a succinct and well-illustrated presentation (precisely 15 minutes!) and with Chris Walker answered questions that arose in the following discussion session. The presentation and discussion on the development of the area around the Stadium highlighted the challenges of securing comprehensive development through our fragmented planning and funding system, but also what local authorities can achieve, given the right circumstances.

A summary of some issues that emerged in discussion is attached.

TEN is grateful to Brent for its hospitality, and to Richard, Chris and Susan Zdan for making our visit so pleasant.

Wembley: 'Spreading the benefits from urban renewal'

Understanding the context

The development of modern Wembley started with extending the Metropolitan Railway out to North West London, which gave rise to a series of suburban housing estates, such as Wembley Park. A large site between the two railway lines was used for the Football Association's national stadium, and the British Empire Exhibition of 1924. Subsequently the exhibition buildings and surrounding land were turned into an industrial estate, which still employs some 6,000 people. However the town centre became run-down, and Wembley was effectively blighted by the stadium (as everything had to close on match days). Hence when it was decided to build a new national football stadium the Council saw the opportunity to bid for the stadium and to create New Wembley. A vision was produced in November 2002 which was followed up by a masterplan in March 2004 for an area covering some 75 hectares.

Selling the vision

The starting point was a much larger stadium, with more and better seats and sightlines, Furthermore less than half the previous level of car parking spaces were to be provided together with parking controls in the surrounding area. The vision was for 'A fascinating world class visitor destination for a cosmopolitan world class city'. The core principles were 'to turn a drab industrial estate into an integral and exciting piece of urban London, to maximise the positive impact and make it a destination of choice, to bring tangible benefits to the London economy, to embrace and celebrate multicultural diversity, with no compromise on quality, prominent and high quality public art, easy access and high standards of energy efficiency to make it sustainable, and a focal point for Brent's many communities.' There is a focus on quality, as the stadium's architect is Norman Foster, and the masterplan is by Richard Rogers.

Implementing the strategy

The key to turning the vision into reality is the 'three stations strategy' to improve linkages to all the surrounding stations in order to spread the load. A new pedestrian route links the stadium to the town centre. The masterplan generally follows the rectangular layout of the original exhibition. Unlike some other large scale projects, which are essentially fine grain, Wembley by its nature involves some very big building blocks. The stadium is to be reoriented, and the link road realigned. There are to be a series of distinct districts or quarters, with a ceremonial route or spine from Wembley Park Station. The masterplan talks of it being like a cathedral city.

Richard Saunders pointed out that originally they were bidding on their own against much larger authorities. English Partnerships set up a Task Force under a prominent property man to advise on how to handle the opportunities. The vision was incorporated in the UDP and in the London Plan, and in September 2003 the Council approved the Wembley Development Framework as Supplementary Planning Guidance.

Richard Saunders emphasised the amount of time that had to be put into talking to different people to get them on board ‘like a second hand car salesman’. They could see that the stadium would have to be built first, followed by the adjacent land, and only then would renewal extend through to the retail park and surrounding estate, and hopefully link the town centre up with the stadium.

There had only been interest from one major developer initially – Quintain, who invested a lot of money in getting residents on board in advance of their planning application, thus demonstrating their commitment.

Catching the benefits for the town centre

Historically the stadium area has always been an ‘industrial island’ next to Wembley’s town centre and residential hinterland, and some trickle down benefits can be expected. Without its ‘burden of history’ it is questionable whether Brent would have bid for the new stadium. There are many downsides, including running the stadium and its impact on the area, e.g. exclusion zone parking for visitors, and transport operators having to react to the variable times matches may end. There is little benefit for surrounding areas as spending power does not spread beyond the stadium (Camden excluded a stadium from its planning brief, as it was not considered a lever for regeneration). However, the prospect of redevelopment has offered opportunities for regenerating the town centre. Through the quality of design and attractiveness of the new scheme, the image of the place should change. Local people see the value of the development in lifting the area as a whole.

The town centre and the stadium have always been seen as two very distinct areas, and overcoming the division will be difficult, though improved physical links are a crucial first step. There will be improved pedestrian links between the three stations and upgrading of footways in the town centre (with the prospect of introducing a café quarter). The links offer the extension eastwards of the existing town centre, and it is hoped that benefits will move west. Also the affordable housing proposed is worth £200 m to Brent.

Mobilising investment

The land is in eight main ownerships, with many more smaller owners on the fringes. The key challenge was attracting the right developer, as previous attempts to get landowners to collaborate had not succeeded. It was only when the cranes were on site, that people began to believe in the area’s regeneration, and Quintain took on the role of lead developer with an initial acquisition of 68 acres. At first they had no definite ideas, but the scheme has evolved into building high density high quality apartment blocks surrounding the Stadium, with two towers. 40% will be classed as affordable. The numbers of homes shot up from 400 to 3,700 units to create the necessary value. Hence the New Wembley is very different from the surrounding suburbia, and is expected to lead to the development of ‘café society’.

A fundamental problem is that a stadium operates erratically. However an iconic piece of architecture is being used to change an area’s image, and, as with Stratford International

Terminal, to 'serve as bait'. There is already evidence of this working with strong interest in building hotels and a major casino. Indeed Wembley could well develop its role as a major conference centre, and as one of the key projects for London's Western Wedge.

A key element has been the LDA agreeing to fund and build the new bridge linking the town centre through to the stadium, with a new public square and a mix of uses. The first phase involves Quintain investing £22 million in a series of local benefits on the back of a 3,700 homes and over a million sq ft of leisure, retail and offices, with many of the buildings being mixed use. The second state, the Wembley Caesars, would involve a further £600 million joint venture to create a major casino complex on 13 acres. There are also other smaller schemes. A key issue is going to be developing the critical mass of attractions, and Brent is looking at others such as museums and sport-related retail.

The English system is haphazard and opportunistic, and investment planning is needed. Everything is done in the wrong order and, as a result, is more expensive. There is risk-taking in achieving large-scale development: for example Haringey Heartlands stalled as it was beyond the LDA coffers. More regional support is needed. Where else would you plan a national stadium without infrastructure, or buying up land first?

Managing large-scale change

Much of the discussion focused on how to respond to opportunities like this, and how to spread the benefits and overcome the barriers. Public investment without land acquisition can create 'ransom strips', though the LDA has helped with CPOs in Brent. The Strategic Railway Authority is unable to upgrade stations to cope, though London Underground is better.

Over 20 different organisations are involved as partners. This requires continual high level communications using a wide variety of media. A key element in managing the process has been setting up a Major Development Committee, involving Quintain with the Strategy Group, spending time getting all the parties working together, and getting all the political parties to sign up. This has made it possible to work through a private developer, who has also helped to create a sense of energy and purpose. Brent has organised well and made the best of what it has. They have worked through groups of officers, project teams and development teams built around various planning applications. E.g. there is the WITT (Wembley infrastructure technical team) with GOL and LDA input that is responsible for putting rail infrastructure in. Each phase of development requires a different team – there is not one team for the whole process. Brent spent a lot of time with the three political parties to get their act together for the 'centrepiece' of the borough. They used study tours, and worked with the local community.

Developing the skills

The tenacity of officers in marketing and pushing the project forward has been key. The commitment to open the Stadium in 2006 has provided an important incentive to make progress. The skills required are quite different from those associated with conventional

planning. The hardest skill to provide was project management, and this was being bought in from a consultant.

What is needed is creativity, ingenuity, contacts and connections, which more senior officers need to have (otherwise planning may as well be done by the GLA with local authorities just doing street cleaning!). Because of Wembley, Brent has been able to recruit staff well, but keeping them is difficult. Skills are lacking, in particular project management, and experience of working on major projects. Qualifications may be a problem as they produce chartered professionals, whereas **impresarios** are needed. Huge technical expertise is needed on scheme of this size, and Brent has employed consultants, requiring them to operate strategically in a 'well-defined box'.

On the issue of planners, Newham decided to 'grow their own', taking on graduates and school leavers, and have been overwhelmed with the quality of people who in 6 months can make very good progress.

Maintaining the public realm

Land not in public ownership can present a problem for policing and cleansing, and Brent has looked for exemplars e.g. Imperial Wharf, Hammersmith. The issues of police powers over the land is important for crowd control around Wembley Stadium and security is being planned between the developers and the police. The sort of security presence needed for large events can also change the character of a place, e.g. Bournemouth in conference season becomes a strange place, as did the recent Urban Summit when Tony Blair visited.

Other experience highlighted the problems and challenges. On the South Bank there are occasional problems with the Riverside Walkway when parts that allow access over private land are closed for certain occasions. In Newcastle apparently the Council is considering CPOing back land as residents feel it is no longer 'theirs'. Problems arise, e.g. in Canary Wharf where cleaners went on strike but could not demonstrate because the space is private. In King's Cross the council has opted to adopt anything that is a street and will use a 'hybrid' for other spaces, e.g. BID system. From the beginning Camden decided that everything had to be adopted in order for the development to be fully integrated with the hinterland.

Peter Bishop again argued for the local authority managing the space, partly to avoid conflicts over 'whose turf this is'. Furthermore the Council will be around for the long-term while developers come and go. However Brent doubted that it could ever fund the high levels of security and maintenance needed in a scheme of this kind.

Nicholas Falk
Esther Caplin
21 February 2005